DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 504 HE 031 996

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TITLE International Distance Education: The Digital Communities Project.

PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Differences; *Distance Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; International Cooperation; International Education; *International Programs; State Universities
IDENTIFIERS *Japan; *University of North Carolina Wilmington

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the participation of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW) in the virtual university component of the Digital Communities Project in Japan. It examines the characteristics of an experimental, international, distance-learning collaboration and explores the politics and practicalities related to international outreach and global collaborations. It stresses that quality international distance education collaborations must be linked to the political, technological, social, and economic context of the distinct countries involved. The paper recounts the origins of the Digital Communities Project in Japan and the university's decision to collaborate with a Japanese industry group and four Japanese universities to identify the cultural, political, and quality issues surrounding distance education on an international scale. The importance of recognizing and working within cultural differences is stressed. Three courses were developed for the demonstration project: Network Multimedia; Japanese Cinema and Cultural Comparison; and Nursing in the United States and Japan. Fifty-seven Japanese and 19 UNCW students registered for the courses in fall 1998. A variety of technologies, including electronic mail, discussion forum software, and software for student assessments, were utilized. Feedback from participating institutions was gathered and plans for a pilot project with five courses in fall 2000 are underway. (DB)

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International Distance Education: The Digital Communities Project

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Abstract This article discusses the participation of The University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW) in the virtual university component of the Digital Communities Project in Japan By "telling the story," we examine the characteristics of an experimental, international distance learning collaboration, explore the politics and practicalities related to international outreach, and demonstrate the potential and intricacies related to global collaborations. Like many other regional institutions, faculty leaders and administrators at The University of North Carolina at Wilmington are cautiously viewing the developing landscape of distance education and responding by constructing an institutional perspective of what quality distance education ought to be. For most institutions of higher education, contemplating distance instruction means constructing a paradigm of instructional delivery inextricably linked to the political, technological, social and economic context of the originating institution. Unless specific partnerships are constructed, distance education to other countries usually comes as a by-product of distance education programs which are designed primarily for American students. Quality, international distance education collaborations are inescapably linked to the political, technological, social and economic context of the distant countries. It is hard to imagine successful international distance learning collaborations without due diligence to interwoven political, economical, and social fates of the countries involved. This article focuses on these interrelated factors and issues.

Background

UNCW is a mid-sized (9,600 students) comprehensive I institution with a graduate student population of approximately 700 students. With the leadership of a new chancellor in 1991, the institution enhanced several

academic programs, shed its "home grown" image, recruited star scholars and defined an outreach agenda. The international aspects of this agenda were reinforced by the chancellor's international public television series, "Globe Watch," in which he travels to numerous countries to explore their social/political realities and evolutions. International distance education was a logical extension of these endeavors.

In the early 1990s, North Carolina's statewide fiber-optic technology (the North Carolina Information Highway - NCIH) was viewed as an introduction to the communication tools of the twenty-first century. This information highway connected people and provided access to education for people throughout the state. The NCIH is an ATM-SONET broadband network with nearly 190 sites in North Carolina, providing educational programs for students in business and industry, healthcare, governmental agencies, and for private citizens.

In the summer of 1998, a diverse university-wide committee and a consultant group presented an institutional self-study that offered recommendations for unifying UNCW's technological initiatives. During the same summer, the university agreed to participate in a "virtual university" experiment-- in collaboration with a Japanese industry group and four Japanese universities-- to determine the cultural, political, and quality issues surrounding distance education on an international scale. This article focuses on this collaboration.

The Digital Communities Project

While UNCW was employing the NCIH and a few faculty were experimenting with online instruction, in 1994 a governmental forum was held in Japan entitled "New Efforts to Apply Advanced Information Systems to Education, Medical Care and Welfare, and Environmental Problems." As a result of this forum, proposals were submitted recommending policy directions and the role of the government in stimulating Japanese citizens to participate fully in the information technology revolution. In 1996, an international symposium entitled, "The Roles of the Government and Regional Societies in the Network Age" was held in Tokyo, Japan. At this symposium, organized by a Japanese university and other organizations, the Digital Communities project was drafted and a committee formed to implement it.

In September 1997, the Digital Communities Committee proposed a "public experiment" to employ information technology and achieve an

information revolution in various Japanese prefectures (states). This experiment would include exploring ways to use information technology in healthcare, city planning, development of new businesses, global information exchange, and a virtual university. In 1997, representatives from UNCW and the Digital Communities Project discussed the virtual university component of the public experiment. UNCW had been identified as a UNC campus to visit regarding distance education. During 1997, four or five delegations of the Japanese business group, Japanese prefectures and universities visited UNCW. These visits involved demonstrations of UNCW's distance learning capabilities, online courses, technological initiatives, and conversations with faculty and staff. Because the campus often entertained representatives from other nations, these early visits to campus met with minimal notice from faculty and staff.

Overall, the Digital Communities (DC) project was to promote the active participation and application of information technology by Japanese citizens. In the course of the project, it was anticipated that various regulations and legal issues regarding distance education would be examined. Additionally, the project would investigate how information technologies could address problems and present solutions in health care, workforce development, intergovernmental collaborations, civic involvement in legislation, and the development of new industries. Students would be able to enroll in courses without the tremendous expenses and difficulties associated with relocation in the United States, while US faculty would likewise not need to be transported to Japan. The primary goals of the virtual university component were to 1) allow students to "virtually" study abroad, 2) enable inter-university exchange between Japan and the United States, 3) learn more about distance learning system standardization, and 4) to promote internationalization of local governments via exchange association networks over the Internet. Generally, the issues facing the Japanese leaders of the virtual university project were similar to those facing North Carolinians: access to higher education, lifelong learning, and standardization of distance education practices.

As the word spread about the international distance education project, faculty and some administrators began expressing concerns about the costs and UNCW's involvement with the Digital Communities Project. Who would compensate the faculty for designing courses? How much faculty time would be involved? How would the various units like admissions and student affairs be reimbursed for staff time? How can the

faculty person be compensated for the time involved with distance education? What would be the costs associated with the project for UNCW? Which institutions would receive the tuition? Who would pay for the use of resources and facilities? What language problems would be encountered? Were students in the two countries equivalent in their levels of education? Some faculty and staff feared the Digital Communities project would be competing for scarce campus resources; thus, they began lobbying.

Noel and Henson (1998) state that international outreach might be viewed as threatening for numerous reasons including the view that it is basically one-sided and technological advancements are being given away, possibly giving away our (U.S.'s) competitive edge. Noel and Henson offer, however, that the boundaries between domestic and international outreach are becoming increasingly blurred. Both are intrinsically influenced by accessing, analyzing and implementing global information and technology. UNCW's Chancellor visited Japan and met with Japanese governors of various prefectures in January of 1998. Upon return, a chronicle of the travels in Japan was reported in the university newsletter. Some faculty and administrators recognized this as an opportunity for the university to explore distance learning on an international scale; others repeated concerns about quality, costs, feasibility, language difficulties, and the mission of the university.

Early in 1998, North Carolina's Governor requested that the Chancellor furnish leadership for the virtual university component of the Digital Communities Project in Japan. In the Spring of 1998, two governors from two different Japanese prefectures visited Wilmington and the governor of the state of North Carolina. During their visits, they addressed faculty, staff and expressed their support for the Digital Communities Project. Their visits, nonetheless, only heightened anxiety on campus for some. Eager to make these meetings as successful as possible, UNCW staff studied the proper protocol for exchanging business cards, gifts, greetings, and maintaining eye contact with their Japanese guests. Yet, fundamental differences in cultures (such as American straightforwardness in discussions and Japanese reliance on "go betweens") were exemplified in program planning, contract negotiations and students' reactions to instruction.

Cultural Differences

The thread of cultural differences is woven throughout the Digital Communities Project. Two university staff members were primary negotiators for the university when it appeared that a formal understanding of the demonstration and pilot phases of the virtual university experiment were needed. This male/female team was sensitized to the political quagmires on campus regarding the use of state or discretionary funds for international distance education projects. They believed their charge was to return from a visit to Japan with an collaborative agreement in which the DCs compensated UNCW for the expenses of course development, faculty compensation, and constructing a presentation for an international forum in Tokyo in November 1998. A native Japanese instructor was recruited to assist UNCW officials as a cultural consultant and interpreter during negotiations. Not surprisingly, even though the instructor had lived in America for nearly ten years, the faculty member demonstrated definite inclinations to conduct business "the Japanese way" with behind the scenes negotiations.

In June of 1998, the UNCW team went to Tokyo, Japan at the invitation of the chief representative of the Japanese business group to finalize negotiations for the virtual university. The UNCW team included the Japanese faculty member. These negotiations, though polite, were laborious. The UNCW team, however, believed they had concluded well because a contract has been signed by Japanese representatives delineating specifics about course delivery, costs, and evaluation for the demonstration and pilot projects. It soon became apparent to the UNCW team, however, that in addition to negotiating the contract, the team members were being expected to increase enthusiasm for the virtual university project among the Japanese universities. These universities still seemed unclear about their degree of participation in the virtual university component of the Digital Communities Project. As a result, the team members found themselves on and off the bullet trains spreading the "American" word about the digital communities virtual university project in various Japanese prefectures.

The Courses

Three courses were ultimately identified for the demonstration project: Network Multimedia, as a Second Language/Japanese Cinema and Cultural Comparison, and Nursing in the United States and Japan. The courses would be offered on the academic schedule of the Japanese universities. When the semester began, the Japanese universities, however, were not quite ready for video conferencing to UNCW. Thus, UNCW faculty, with the leadership of the computer science professor, quickly adjusted their courses so that at least half of the course would be available over the Internet. The four Japanese universities that elected to participate in the project wish to remain annoymous. Somewhere in the process of planning for the courses, it became apparent that the Japanese universities also expected to teach specific courses to American students. UNCW representatives were not as confident that they could encourage students to enroll in courses with Japanese students in an atypical term. As a result, these courses have not yet been implemented. At UNCW, following the schedule of the Japanese universities necessitated changes in the registration process. The distance education courses would be offered for credit and taught by UNCW faculty who teach on-campus courses. The faculty were an associate professor in computer science who was published internationally regarding computer networking, the Japanese faculty member who had served as an interpreter, and a part-time native Korean faculty member in the School of Nursing who taught regular UNCW classes. One of the courses, Network Multimedia, Computer Science 475, was intended for students who already had a basic understanding of personal computers and the Internet, but who wanted to understand the underlying computer and communications technologies of the Internet while gaining knowledge about emerging trends and issues. The course consisted of three major units: the Internet, multimedia computing, and computer communication networks. This course was designed for junior/senior level computer science and/or business majors. A textbook was required for the course. Students needed to know how to navigate the Web, download files from the Web, search the Web, and perform browser configuration. In order to participate in the course, students need a UNCW VAX e-mail account, access to the Internet (28.8 kbps or higher) a PC capable of running Netscape or Internet Explorer (4.x or higher), and Microsoft Netmeeting (2.x or higher). The associate

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professor of the course has published more than 50 journal articles, conference and technical papers. His research interests include computer networks, multimedia systems, distributed systems, and distance education. During the course registration period, both UNCW and Japanese students elected to take the course.

The English as a Second Language/Japanese Cinema and Cultural Comparison was selected because it would provide an opportunity for Japanese students to practice conversational English while learning about American and Japanese culture through cinema and media. For UNCW students, it would afford them an opportunity to develop an understanding of Japanese language and culture by comparing Japanese and U.S. culture through cinema and media. There were extensive discussions in the class on society, family structure, women, and related issues. This class was taught primarily through video conferencing. The instructor was born in Akashi, Japan, completed all formal education in Japan before earning a graduate degree in New York, and is a board member of the national and regional Japanese organizations.

The third course, in nursing, was designed primarily for Japanese students. Topics included: an overview of nursing practice in the United States, nursing education in the United States and Japan, diverse nursing roles and settings, nursing specialties, health care delivery systems and issues, and professionalism of nursing in Japan and the United States. This course was delivered using a combination of video conferencing and the Internet. The instructor was born in Seoul, Korea with a specialty in transcultural nursing.

The aforementioned courses commenced in October 1998. There were 76 students who began the demonstration courses. The registration data were as follows:

CSC 475 - UNCW	10 students
CSC 475- Japanese universities	25 students
JPN 492 - UNCW	9 students
JPN 492 - Japanese universities	10 students
NSG 492 - Japanese universities.	22 students

Students at the Japanese universities were reluctant to register for college credit because they were not sure how well they would perform in the classes. The Japanese students appeared to be more reticent during discussion forums and email conversations. Faculty members reported that a great deal of time was required for course development, monitoring discussion forums, reading email, and maintaining dialogue and interactions among all students, and that the courses required considerably more time and effort than traditional courses.

There are definite technologies that faculty found useful in creating responsive online learning environments. These included:

- electronic mail for instructor/student interactions
- a course data base for distributing course materials
- Real Network's "Real Video" for video clips of the instructor
- discussion forum software for carrying out classroom discussions
- Microsoft's "NetMeeting" software for virtual office hours
- software for student assessments (online quizzes and exams)
- two-way ISDN interactive video conferencing

Students in all classes were expected to participate in asynchronous electronic discussions using a web-based software tool called the Discussion Forum. Each student was expected to introduce him/herself on the discussion forum and engage in specific discussions on topics introduced by other students. Some questions Japanese students asked American students are listed below:

- What do you think of arranged marriages?
- What is independence?
- What is your image of Japanese couples?
- How do you spend your holiday?

American students responded with questions like:

- What is the most celebrated holiday?
- What are some childhood hobbies?
- What is it like being Japanese?
- Why do so many Japanese like America?

• Why do so many Japanese like America?

Feedback from Japanese Universities

In January 1999, representatives from the Japanese universities met with representatives from UNCW to provide feedback on the three demonstration courses. Among their remarks, the DCs reiterated that the DCs project was the first collaborative project of its kind designed to implement the vision of improving access to information, problem-solving, and revitalizing local communities by encouraging use of information technologies. They stated the need to create attractive courses in which working people could participate.

Each of the universities participating in the project provided an oral and written feedback on the reactions of students at their institutions. Feedback mentioned by each Japanese university included:

- general satisfaction with the English as a Second Language that was being team taught by a Japanese professor

- concern about the English discussion forum tool used as a component of online courses designed for interaction between students and faculty; Japanese students found participation in the discussion to be difficult

- acknowledgement that Japanese students felt pressure during class because they were representing Japan

- identification of a need for interpreters and translators during class

- findings that the content of the courses could sometimes be considered heavy by the Japanese students

- revelation that the team teaching model could be beneficial for all distant students

- discovery that there should be two-tiered course for English as a second language to accommodate students' language abilities

In the fall of the year 2000, the pilot project will commence. This component of the experiment will include five courses. Faculty and staff at UNCW are now acknowledging that international distance education is more than a one-way transmittal of knowledge. They are also discovering that engaging in international distance education can stimulate institutional interdisciplinary collaborations, scholarly activity, and add to the developing knowledge about national and international distance education

The complex process of constructing, refining and adding to the knowledge of international distance education mirrors the processes that educators and students will pursue in our transforming educational evironment. The virtual university that will ultimately be developed will be a result of collective knowledge gained from theoretical underpinnings, actual experience and dialogue among educators from diverse backgrounds. This is how we will learn, work, evaluate and create in our evolving technological era.

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